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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Graduate Women International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is hereby circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Menstrual Hygiene Insecurity and menstruation stigmatisation as severe barriers to girls' and women's education worldwide and the importance of Menstrual Hygiene Management for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, 5 and 6.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights holds the right to health (Article 25)[1] and the right to education (Article 26)[2] as fundamental rights for every human being. Nevertheless, considerable barriers curtailing the equal and safe access to hygiene and education for women and girls across the world persist to this day, among which is the issue of Menstrual Hygiene Insecurity (MHI). Concerningly, over 1.2 billion girls and women across the world lack access to the basic sanitation rendered necessary by the natural process of menstruation. Periods are thus a matter of shame and embarrassment for millions of girls and women around the world and a major impediment to their successful completion of secondary and tertiary education and professional advancement. With this statement, GWI draws attention to the issue of MHI and menstrual stigmatisation as severe barriers to girls' and women's safe access to education.

GWI emphasizes that access to education is both an internationally recognised human right, as well as a fundamental enabler to achieve economic growth, human development and peace and stability. GWI also notes that education is a prevailing means of empowerment for women and girls around the world. As a consequence, the barriers preventing women and girls from fulfilling their right to education and thus becoming independent and valuable members of society must be acknowledged and fully eliminated; this includes addressing MHI.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) define Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) as the awareness, information and confidence to manage menstruation with safety and dignity, using safe hygienic materials together with adequate water, agent and spaces for washing and disposal with privacy and dignity. GWI enhances this definition by emphasizing access to menstrual hygiene products as integral to furthering their social and economic development.

Global respect for MHM is also a crucial component for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and especially Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all (at all ages); SDG 4 ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education; SDG 5 achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and SDG 6 ensuring access to clean water and sanitation for all.

Although menstruation is common among most women around the world, menstruation is also a globally stigmatized issue. Menstruation contributes to the school absenteeism of millions of girls and women. MHI often forces girls to miss class with the onset of their monthly period and, as absences increase so does the likelihood they will drop out of school entirely. This underscores the need to expand health education; young girls and boys no matter where they live must know about their bodies and sexual and reproductive health and rights. An example of GWI's concern is that in Kenya[3] girls will miss an average of four days of school each month – totaling about 20% of the school year. The stigmatisation and silence surrounding the subject of menstruation is just one of the many contributing factors to the phenomenon of MHI.

Stigma and shame shroud menstruation globally and many societies around the world maintain archaic, and often harmful ideas and beliefs about menstruation. Such myths often portray women and girls as inferior to men and boys, thus promoting gender discrimination, inequality and patriarchal practices.

1 http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

2 http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

3 https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/kenya-will-give-free-menstrual-pads-to-girls/

The persistent and widespread taboo surrounding menstruation results in girls in many low and middle-income countries (LMIC) entering puberty with knowledge gaps and misconceptions about menstruation. In India[4], only one out of two girls has knowledge about menstruation before their first period in stark contrast to Japan where 92% of survey participants report receiving adequate information about menstruation[5]. GWI appeals to States to provide accurate education on menstruation and menstrual hygiene, so that women and girls feel confident and empowered enough to make informed decisions about how they manage their menstruation.

Unnecessarily, MHI can lead to lower performance, increased absenteeism and a higher drop-out rate on the part of girls and women worldwide. GWI, through its global network of National Federations and Associates, aims to be the vehicle for change on this issue and to work towards the elimination of MHI as a severe barrier to girls' and women's education.

GWI calls on States to recognise the right to adequate menstrual hygiene management as a human right and to enable girls to stay in school by ensuring access to hygienic menstrual products, adequate toilets, water and disposal options.

Recommendations to the 37th session of the Human Rights Council

Bearing in mind that MHI, menstrual stigmatisation and the lack of access to MHM severely infringe the ability of millions of women and girls across the world to fulfill their right to education, GWI makes the following recommendations to States:

Develop and fund programs aimed to break down taboos and build positive social norms and perception on menstruation and train community leaders to organize these programs.

Collaborate with NGOs who work on MHM and utilize their expertise as a means to break taboos and decrease MHI.

Encourage communities to identify both male and female role models who will speak out positively about menstruation.

Include MHM as a critical component of reproductive and sexual health education and aim to p in a tone that participants are comfortable with.

Widely dispense information related to sexual health and MHM to young men and women alike at an appropriate age as part of school curricula; utilize local information channels to continue distribution into adulthood.

Fully empower teachers at all levels to teach and speak about menstruation with comfort.

Ensure access to free sanitary products and adequate toilet facilities in every school as a means to improve girls' and female teachers' school attendance.

Encourage policies that promote safe and affordable options for menstrual products.

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4 http://menstrualhygieneday.org/

5 https://wbc.org/2016/03/blood-sweat-and-tears-how-menstruation-holds-women-and-girls-back/